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Design for Dialogue: Valuing Doubt in an Age of Conviction

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In a time of polarisation haunted by shadows of hatred, liberal platitudes to ‘agree to differ’ is a counsel of ‘tolerance’. But, can we dream more deeply than to simply tolerate each other? This paper explores what it might take to create meetings and media that build creative explorations to nurture empathy and understanding, especially when we disagree.

Design for Dialogue

The tools for dialogue are in our pockets as never before, yet the social media we speak through has been capitalised and weaponised to such an extent that, for too many, social media speaks for us and speaks badly. Some marginalised communities embrace a new power to film and fight unacceptable realities, energising the same platforms. Yet, the rise of hate speech, social media's treacherous shadow, threatens to hollow out democracy, tweet by Trumpian tweet. Until social media platforms reform, we are free to step back from being triggered and respond by de-escalating rather than polarisation. Here are some people who did.

Meeting the Other

Last November, I moderated a meeting between Joan Scourfield and Jacob Dunne for the annual lecture of the Forgiveness Project.¹ Joan Scourfield's son, James Hodgkinson, was a 28-year-old trainee paramedic, killed in 2011 from a single punch to his head. His attacker, Jacob Dunne, pleaded guilty to this random, unprovoked attack and served 13 months in prison for manslaughter. Later, James' mother, Joan Scourfield, met Jacob through restorative justice charity Remedi. Though Joan's son was killed by Jacob, she had moved beyond demonising him. Her main motive was to seek answers to understand what had happened and to come to terms with the family's overwhelming grief. Jacob's remorse and his own parallel (and unexpected) sense of loss eventually led Joan to help to encourage Jacob to rebuild his life and go back to study for GCSEs. Jacob recently completed a degree and is now a father.

What struck me about our dialogue, with an audience of several hundred at the Royal Geographical Society's London auditorium, was the quality of attention between the people in the room. Joan and Jacob led an exchange that created a space to pause in a place where a new kind of geography of compassion started to emerge. A palpable sense of *witnessing* developed as this dialogue between people still seeking to see past the chronic pain of their suffering, found a way to communicate an understanding across the borders of self and other, victim and perpetrator. That aspiration was felt especially in the spaces and silences connecting the continents of loss between them (Figure 1.)

As a new dad, Jacob experiences as never before a parent's fear of losing a child. The joys of parenting exposed a vulnerability that reconnected him with Joan. They met in a place alive to the recognition of his earlier violence alongside Joan's suffering and kindness. This shaped a space where the conditions of contact helped the meeting unfold until it spilled into dialogue. Jacob says:

I knew how important it was that I looked them in the eye and told them how sorry I was... To hear them talk about their love

for James and about the type of person he was affected me deeply, and reinforced my determination to make something of myself and to do everything I could to prevent others going through the kind of trauma they'd gone through.



→ Figure 1.
Dialogue has its
roots in consent,
2020. © Gracie Dahl

The Depth of Their Listening

Witnessing their communication, their ability to be present to each other, I was struck by the quality of their attention and depth of their listening. The room felt rich in these qualities through the alchemy of restorative approaches in creating a space to fully hear each other's words, sounds and silences, like rests in a musical score. Marina Cantacuzino, founder of The Forgiveness Project observes: "...there is some sort of incredible ingredient that comes together when people [who] have been hurt work with people who used to hurt others".²

That ingredient inspires listeners to be as present as possible, to intuit and respond, tuned to the frequency of deeper currents of expression, intention and meaning that inform the feelings that might find utterance. This attitude touches explorations of the term "deep listening" coined by the composer Pauline Oliveros, who found when playing back her field recordings that her microphone picked up far more in the acoustic environment than she heard at the time of recording. What filters her (or our) listening? Do we sometimes hear only what we want to choose to listen for? What of the other sounds and voices in that space? Or what we might not dare to hear?

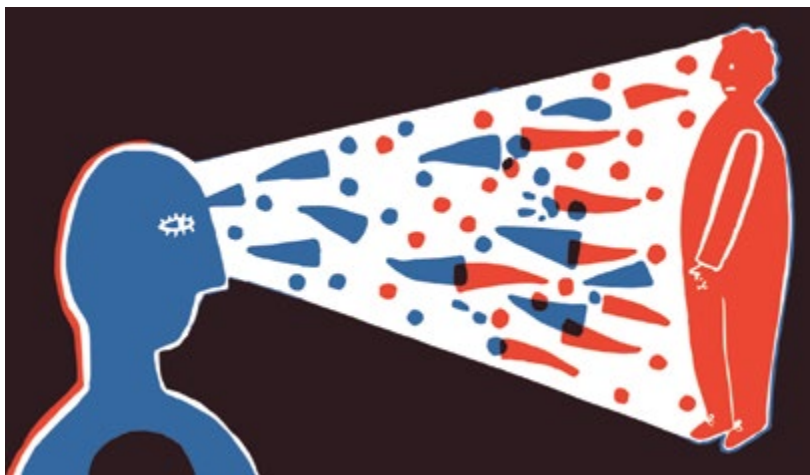
I was struck by Joan's ability to relate to Jacob as the person he is becoming, not binding him to the figure of a man whose terrible action one night might define him. It is rare for a Mum who has suffered like

this to lead others towards such insight and this is Joan's great gift, hard-won and fashioned through years of grief. A deeper flow is at work for Joan, Jacob and many others who remake themselves as stronger and braver people from navigating suffering.³ It is a jagged journey and, although many in the room affirmed the benefits of the atmosphere, how hard do we find it to loosen our grip on the totalising labels of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' and dare to allow cross-currents of feeling move us, perhaps even towards the audacity of forgiveness. The journey can trigger or unlock new levels of pain. This struggle is a staging post for many who follow a stronger desire to be freed from the cycle of hateful thoughts and actions that typically lock both victim and perpetrator in the darkest moments of their unwanted connection.⁴ Both Jacob and Joan are also fired by the conviction that something good must come from overwhelming loss. Their exchange connects with the philosophical challenge of Emmanuel Lévinas, who urges us to pay profound attention to the face of the other as a path away from subsuming another's being into a/our "totalising vision" (Hand, 1996). Lévinas insists that the gaze of the other is primary, leaving us the ethical duty of creating and responding to our relatedness.

Decolonial Dialogue

The decolonising drive undercuts totalitarian impulses and the cultural hierarchies of colonial and other ideologies. When single narratives or monologues conflict, the ability to hear and juxtapose competing claims is essential and can produce a polyphonic or dialogic experience, a space of genuine dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981). How to nurture this pedagogically? A generation ago, the historian of

Britishness, Linda Colley, argued for a re-visiting of the events that history is made from, freer from the poles of imperial nostalgia or post-colonial condemnation: "We have a perfectly usable, innovative, collective past, if we only look for and select it," she says.⁵ Today, historians like David Olusoga model this work to recover suppressed narratives and reframe versions of Britain's past (Olusoga, 2016). Decolonial narratives are proving more able to embrace diverse perspectives modelling an



↑ Figure 2.
Do we see what is
there or our image of
it?, 2020. © Gracie Dahl

in the binary of substituting one monocultural dominance for another. Competing accounts need to be true and accurate (essential in the age of the fake) in order to begin the more supple work of holding ambiguity and triangulating experiences from different perspectives to find a shared and integrated narrative (Al-Maria, et al., 2016). Writer Julia Galef talks of developing a "Scout mindset" led by "the drive not to make one idea win or another lose, but just to see what's really there as honestly and accurately as you can, even if it's not pretty or convenient or pleasant." (Figure 2.)⁶

The process can open the prospect of new and more humane understandings of the ‘other’ (as with Jacob and Joan) where connections can develop between people often kept separate by oppositional narratives.

Diaphobia



↑ Figure 3. UAL chancellor Grayson Perry and Professor of Documentary, Pratāp Rughani, 2019. © UAL

It is easy to underestimate how hard this can be. It turns out that some people committed to the idea of dialogue find the experience of it particularly hard to live out in practice. Artist Grayson Perry presented this diagnosis in *A Bad Case of Diaphobia*, a reflexive exploration of what he describes as the psychology and artwork of diaphobia, a fear of being affected by the ‘other’ through dialogue. In the fallout of the Brexit referendum, Perry made two ceramic “Brexit vases”, one each for Leave and Remain. He eventually named them *Matching Pair* to emphasise the similarity he found on either side of that divide when crowdsourcing ideas, photographs and phrases from each group on social media. (Figure 3.)

So many families, workplaces and communities are divided by populism that it is painfully easy to test this in our experience: what happens when a favourite view is dismissed on either side of my/your opinion? What would it look and feel like to dare to attempt to suspend certainty and walk in another’s uncomfortable shoes — to take a journey of ‘not-knowing’ through which our own ideas, experience and work might be influenced otherwise or even reconfigured?

Methods and Spaces to Enable Discussions

How to curate spaces and discussions that enable such journeys? For some, exploring difficult issues requires the creation of “safe spaces”. In their article *From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces*, Arao and Clemens (2013) emphasise that the essential quality needed now is courage, in order to develop an attitude to listening that enables us to stray outside our comfort zones. Where would you or I draw the line in what is acceptable in an open dialogue? What would we rule out, and for what reasons?

What in our communication privileges the softening of conviction and the quieter confidence to doubt and thus enable another’s experience to impact us? The light of seeing alterity in the world can eclipse reflex judgments based on whether we already agree with each other or not and thus open a door to the dialogic. A recent BBC project, built on research into “humanbecoming” suggests this useful, tested methodology.⁷

- Ask your speaker to explain their perspective and why they feel so strongly. Listen, without interruption, putting aside judgements, counter-arguments and solutions.

- Summarise the core of what you have heard and check you have understood correctly, including the emotions and texture of their story. This does not mean you have to agree.
- Ask whether they agree with your summary. If not, ask them to explain more.
- Continue with this process until the speaker gives a resounding “Yes”. They should at this point be likely to listen to your side of the story.

The spirit of this is receptivity rather than agreement. Agreement may not follow. The point is not to agree or persuade through duress but to experience relatedness whilst appreciating difference. The key task here is to develop the ‘muscle’ of awareness that enables an appreciation of the other whatever we think of the views we are exploring. In turn, this may unsettle each other’s convictions and open up new channels of communication and affect. If receptivity and even appreciation suffuses our listening questions, answers may emerge, perfumed with similar qualities. NPR broadcaster Krista Tippett in *The Art of Generous Listening* explains how her radio series *On Being* strives to create understanding for how another thinks.⁸ Tippett suggests we look more to “how” and “why”, rather than “what” and “when” as keys to developing dialogue. By shifting our attention, we expand the foundations of relatedness to focus on what truly matters, she says: we can develop “discernment”. “The point is not to agree, but to come into relationship. What we have in common is our questions.”

Can Communicating with the ‘Head and Heart’ be Taught?



If there is one thing that the situations of deep listening have in common, it is the *collective* atmosphere created and fostered when people seek dialogue giving their whole attention with mind, body and spirit, rather than staking out positions in a head or intellect-only engagement. The discussion reminded me of the emphasis in strands of Indian religio-philosophy that ‘citta’ the “intelligent heart” is a faculty of the head and heart conjoined.⁹ The Western legacy of Cartesian dualism can leave a distrust of this insight. The desire to reintegrate intellect with emotional intelligence surfaces in creative practices that embrace the imagination to ‘only connect’ the prose and the passion of life. (Figure 4.)

Can the conditions for this kind of dialogue, with its profoundly felt empathic exchanges of self and other, be taught? Listening to people discussing the impact of Jacob and Joan’s

→ Figure 4. How much mental space are you willing to rent out to your hurts and grievances? 2018. ©Sophie Standing

conversation encouraged me to help develop a more explicit pedagogy for this. I know from experience as a practitioner how filmmakers, photographers and journalists can be helped by mapping the ethics of our practice in developing a dialogue and creating media, yet how rarely these underpinning ideas are situated as a central emphasis in the process of making our work.¹⁰

The new creative pedagogic tool *Ethics for Making* disinters ethical questions that audiences and makers bump into when exploring questions of media representation.¹¹ Such ethical explorations can be extended further in the choice of which events become stories in our culture, and why.

Designing for dialogue may begin as a response to political polarisation, but its effects are joyfully unpredictable. Exploring such questions will likely be profoundly interdisciplinary. For all the advances of the West's Enlightenment, our scholarship risks being imprisoned in its own specialisms. With complex challenges and 'wicked problems', the weakness of trying to tackle big questions in separate compartments is becoming clearer. Preparing the ground by learning to listen creatively to dialogic encounters should lead us to rethink not just why we got here, but to imagine something finer.

How might a genuine dialogue look, feel and sound for you?

■

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/joan-scourfield-on-facing-the-man-who-killed-her-son/>

Accessed 21.10.20

² See <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com>

³ See stories from The Forgiveness Project <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>

⁴ There are complex feelings for many, as conflicting emotions are experienced. These are brilliantly explored in the graphic novel *Forgiveness is Really Strange* (Noor and Cantacuzino, 2018).

⁵ See Colley, L. (1999, December 8). Britishness in the 21st Century.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20040809182858/http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page3049.asp>

⁶ https://www.ted.com/talks/julia_galef_why_you_think_you_re_right_even_if_you_re_wrong/transcript?referrer=playlist-how_to_turn_the_political_conv

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51705369> Accessed 14.06.20

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5W36VWNd9E>

⁹ This is a foundational principle of Buddhist meditation.

¹⁰ Ethics for Making <https://screenworks.org.uk/archive/volume-10-2/ethics-for-making>

¹¹ <https://ethics.arts.ac.uk/>

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